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# Bible Group Defies Rebels Threatening to Kill Hostage

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A hostage drama unfolding in Colombia pits a Huntington Beach-based organization that specialized in translating the Bible for remote peoples against a heavily armed guerrilla group that has kidnaped one of its American workers.

The guerrillas took Chester A. Bitterman III hostage at gunpoint in Bogotá on Jan. 19. The kidnapers say they will kill Bitterman unless Wycliffe Bible Translators withdraws by Feb. 19 the 109 people it has in Colombia.

Wycliffe officials said Friday that the organization, whose 4,000 workers are translating the Scriptures into 750 languages in 36 countries, will "not yield" to the demand and will "cooperate fully with the Colombian government in its stand against the guerrillas."

The governments of both the United States and Colombia have stated that they will not negotiate for Bitterman's release.

The kidnapers, who claim to be part of the April 19 Movement, known as M-19, charged in a statement delivered to a Bogotá newspaper that the linguist and his organization are "an affront to our national sovereignty and a means by which the plunder of our national resources is institutionalized."

The Colombian minister of government, German Zea Hernandez, said that neither Wycliffe nor its subsidiary, the Summer Institute of Linguistics, is connected with the U.S. government, as the guerrillas have charged.

"The United States doesn't have anything to do with the institute," Hernandez said. "It's a private organization that has contacts with the Colombian government. The Colombian government will never be forced to negotiate under pressure."

Wycliffe has also been criticized by some anthropologists, left-wing political groups and by a conference sponsored by the World Council of Churches.

## Called CIA Front

Critics contend that Wycliffe is a front for the CIA that its workers have destroyed the cultures and political development of indigenous peoples and that it proselytizes using a Protestant ethical base to promote capitalism.

Last week, 15 students from UC Irvine picketed in front of Wycliffe's headquarters in Huntington Beach as part of a project for a course titled "Community Organizing 198." The class gives college credit for learning to organize such activities and analyzing the results.

The students, who said they support the M-19 movement, shouted, "Culture destroyers, out of Latin America."

The world's largest Bible translation organization, Wycliffe seeks primitive communal groups whose languages are unwritten and it works with them to develop an alphabet, primers and dictionaries.

W. Cameron Townsend, now 84, founded Wycliffe 47 years ago as a training school for people planning to study indigenous languages in Latin America. Since the first field work began in Mexico in 1935, the organization has produced more than 5,000 published articles describing languages and customs of some 500 contemporary, but little-known, peoples.

Wycliffe Bible Translators takes its name from John Wycliffe, the 14-Century English religious reformer who produced the first translation of the Bible into English.

Wycliffe workers, who raise their own financial support before going into the field, teach villagers to read and write, and they translate the New Testament into the tribe's language.

"The process usually takes about 15 years," Betty Blair, a spokeswoman for Wycliffe in Huntington Beach, said.

"We don't preach or baptize. Our goal is to let the people develop

their own ethnic minority languages and be all they can be—not change their cultures. When the translation is done, we leave."

Bitterman, whose parents and family live in Lancaster, Pa., is the eldest of eight children and a graduate of Columbia Bible College in South Carolina. He and his wife, Brenda, and their two daughters, ages 3 and 1½, went to Wycliffe's center at Loma Linda, 85 miles southeast of Bogotá, in September, 1979.

The Bittermans had completed training to go into the bush of interior Colombia to translate for the Carijoh Indian tribe.

Wycliffe sources said Bitterman was at Wycliffe's Bogotá headquarters on Jan. 19, the day he was captured, because he had been scheduled for gall bladder surgery several days later.

## Searched for Documents

According to Mrs. Bitterman, who witnessed the abduction of her ailing husband, a man dressed as a police officer knocked on the door of the headquarters about 6:30 a.m. When the door was opened, six men and women, armed with machine guns, burst in, seeking Wycliffe director Al Wheeler, who was not there.

Wycliffe personnel said the guerrillas spent more than an hour at the headquarters, searching for documents and questioning the six Wycliffe workers there. Finally, Wycliffe people said, the militants grabbed Bitterman and said "We'll take this man."

The kidnapers fled in a Wycliffe car, taking short-wave radio and office equipment as well as Bitterman.

Mrs. Bitterman, whose parents are also Wycliffe workers in Colombia, reported that she had received a letter from her husband Feb. 2, which said that he had been treated well and that his health was holding up despite his need for surgery.

He wrote that he had asked his captors for—and had been promised—a Spanish-language Bible. Mrs. Bitterman said.